

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL PRESS RELEASE

AI Index: AMR 23/038/2006 (Public)
News Service No: 220
7 September 2006

Embargo Date: 7 September 2006 10:00 GMT

Colombia: Government gives “green light” to attacks against human rights activists

(Madrid) In a new report released today, Amnesty International criticizes the Colombian government for giving a “green light” to attacks against human rights defenders in the country and called on the international community to support local activists more effectively.

The report -- which includes numerous case studies -- highlights the difficulties faced by scores of individuals and organizations in cities and in remote areas of Colombia who work to protect civilians and to end impunity.

“Attacks against human rights activists in Colombia have a double purpose: they aim to silence individuals and prevent others from continuing with their work,” said Sofia Nordenmark, Amnesty International human rights defenders coordinator.

“Some individuals have received threats so regularly that they consider it part of their routine. Others have been forced to leave their communities.”

Luis Torres, a human rights campaigner from the community of El Salado, has represented his community before the authorities in relation to two massacres allegedly carried out by army-backed paramilitary groups. He also campaigned on the conditions for the safe return to El Salado of community members who had fled following threats from the guerilla group FARC. On 26 May 2005, he was charged with rebellion and detained. He was conditionally released on 8 June 2005. However, the investigation remains open despite obvious flaws in the evidence.

Cases received by Amnesty International also reveal that individual attacks, such as killings and threats, are part of a wider strategy to clamp down on reports of human rights violations and on the links between paramilitary groups and the army.

“The official strategy against human rights campaigners seems to be three folded: government authorities publicly question their legitimacy, mount unfounded legal processes and fail to bring to justice those who commit the attacks, even when evidence is widely available.”

“Impunity faced by those who attack human rights activists is a dangerous weapon. It sends the message that civilians must refrain from demanding justice.”

In response to the demand for protection, the Colombian government has developed a number of programmes aimed at protecting individual human rights campaigners, trade unionists and journalists. The programmes include the provision of security guards, bullet-proof jackets and special transport. Hundreds have been benefiting from the programme.

“Practical protection measures are not enough as they fail to create the basic conditions for human rights campaigners to work freely. The best way of protecting human rights defenders is by bringing to justice those who attack them.”

Amnesty International called on President Uribe to use his second term in office to tackle the endemic impunity for human rights violations by:

- Publicly recognizing the legitimacy of human rights activists;
- Ensuring that those responsible for human rights violations are brought to justice;
- Preventing the use of unfounded criminal charges against human rights activists.

For a copy of "Colombia - Fear and Intimidation: The dangers of human rights work", please see: <http://web.amnesty.org/library/Index/ENGAMR230332006>

Public Document

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